

History: Understanding Thailand's Monarchy Problem

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One of the more telling decisions of the Royal Thai Army, which seized power in Thailand in a coup on May 22 this year, is to erect a new "Great Kings Monument," comprising nine giant statues representing Thailand's greatest kings, to honor Thailand's monarchy and its aging king, the ninth in the current dynasty.

The monarchy also figures prominently in the military regime's Orwellian "12 core values," which it has ordered all Thai students to recite daily: "to uphold the nation, the religions and the Monarchy, which is the key institution"; "to understand and learn the true essence of democratic ideals with His Majesty the King as the Head of State"; "to be conscious and mindful of one's actions in line with His Majesty's the King's statements"; and "to practice the philosophy of Sufficiency Economy of His Majesty the King."

Whatever one might think of these ideas, in Thailand, one cannot criticize them or risk facing a 15-year jail term for "*lèse majesté*," the crime of insulting the monarchy or members of the royal family.

Since Thailand's political crisis began in 2005, the monarchy has become intensely politicized. The *lèse majesté* law has been used liberally. There are possibly hundreds of prisoners in Thai jails convicted under the law. *Lèse majesté* cases are so sensitive that trials are held in private; relatives, human rights organizations, and the media are usually forbidden from attending, so the exact number of convictions is unknown.

How to explain today's paranoia over the monarchy?

To answer this question, we need to go back to the origins of Thailand's modern political and economic system.

As the Cold War escalated in the late 1950s, the military seized political control in a coup, forming an alliance with the monarchy and the state bureaucracy—who in the Thai language are called "servants of the king."

Later, they co-opted the Thai-Chinese families who dominated the financial and manufacturing sector, whose loyalties to Thailand, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, had previously been in question. Chinese business know-how was essential to the regime's policy of transforming Thailand's economy from an agricultural backwater into an industrial powerhouse. They welcomed the protection of the military and monarchy.

This arrangement gained the crucial backing of the United States, in return for the military dictatorship's support in suppressing communism in Indochina.

It worked. By the beginning of the 1990s, Thailand was the world's fastest growing economy. Thailand's king became the world's wealthiest, surpassing even the absolute monarchs of the oil-rich Persian Gulf.

As in other developing countries, modern Thailand developed essentially as an oligarchy. The country was run by an elite of interlocking families from the military, aristocracy, bureaucracy and wealthy Thai-Chinese families, tied together through intermarriage and mutual economic interest. While periods of outwardly democratic rule were occasionally tolerated, ultimate control lay with this oligarchy. When it was threatened—by communist insurgency, leftist students, or provincial politicians getting above their station—the military stepped in, often very violently.

From the beginning, a big problem was how to ensure the consent of the rural majority—which, up until the 1990s, comprised 70-80% of the population—to this political and economic arrangement.

The answer was “monarchy”—not so much as a political institution, but as an ideology of submission. In Thailand, loyalty to the monarchy is bound up with the feudal values of servility, subservience, deference, humility, respect for authority and hierarchy, self-restraint, and discipline.

Successive military governments constructed a state personality cult around King Bhumibol. They resurrected the ancient Buddhist theory that the king was a future Buddha, which conferred on these servile values the sanction of religious truth.

Thailand’s state education system from primary school to university and its mass media heavily promoted these values and the idea that a Thai’s highest duty was “loyalty to the monarchy.” The *lèse majesté* law ensured it could not be questioned, at least openly.

Thailand’s reputation for politeness, gentleness, soft-spokenness, tolerance, and as the “land of smiles” —made famous by the tourism industry and less tastefully, its sex industry—is a product of this manufactured culture of submission. As a famous manual on “Thai manners” written by a minor aristocrat teaches, “softness and submission are a general characteristic of the Thai people.”

The military, bureaucracy, and the now powerful Thai-Chinese business sector, have all exploited this ideology of monarchy to stifle dissent from the rural and urban poor—those who have least benefitted from Thailand’s industrial transformation.

For example, the Thai-Chinese tycoon Dhanin Chearavanont, CEO of Charoen Phokbhand, one of Asia’s largest agro-business conglomerates with annual revenues of almost \$50 billion, has given speeches praising the king’s “sufficiency economy theory,” which teaches Thais to live simply within their means. While phrased in Buddhist terms, the king’s “theory” in effect legitimizes the level of economic inequality in Thailand, one of the worst in the Asia, according to the Asian Development Bank.

All of the Thai state’s grand projects of the modern era: counter-insurgency, economic development, mega-dam construction, the war on drugs, the austerity program following the 1997-8 financial crisis, and especially authoritarian rule, have been justified by reference to “monarchy,” and especially to the king himself. Once the monarchy is invoked, resistance loses all legitimacy.

Monarchy, not democracy, thus emerged as the political ideology that accompanied Thailand’s modern economic transformation.

Two developments now pose a mortal threat to this powerful ideology of monarchy: the declining health of King Bhumibol, which signals the approaching end of his reign; and the politicization of the rural and urban poor, whose support for the political parties set up by the businessman-turned-politician Thaksin Shinawatra, have, for the first time in Thailand’s modern history, given them a political voice.

As the elite has conspired to overthrow three democratically-elected governments led by pro-Thaksin

parties, anti-monarchy sentiment, even republicanism, has risen to unprecedented levels. This is a reaction not simply to the person of the monarch or the institution, but to this culture of submission.

With the king's long reign now about to end, it is not surprising that the military regime-and the Thai establishment which backs it-are desperate to resuscitate the old theme of monarchy as submission and silence those who question it.

Whether it can survive the passing of King Bhumibol is another question.

Patrick Jory

P.S.

* November 19, 2014:

<https://theglobalobservatory.org/2014/11/understanding-thailands-monarchy-problem-2/>

* Patrick Jory is Senior Lecturer in Southeast Asian History at the University of Queensland.